

Patients and provincial governments are ‘on their own’ in the battle against Covid-19

By **Geordin Hill-Lewis MP** – DA Shadow Minister of Finance

Note to Editors: The following speech will be delivered during Parliament’s debate on the Division of Revenue Amendment Bill and is under embargo until delivery.

There are times in politics when circumstances come together to bring into stark relief the choices we face. Today is such a day.

This is a very important day to be having this debate because three important things are happening today.

Firstly, we are considering a Division of Revenue which imposes severe cuts on provincial governments – particularly in health and education.

On the same day, an investigation by the BBC has revealed the horror and gross human rights abuses taking place in the Eastern Cape health department as hospitals collapse under the weight of years of corruption, mismanagement and cadre deployment.

And third, the Treasury is today required to give a letter of guarantee that it will again bailout the defunct and bankrupt SAA.

Those three things are all connected and related.

Every decision in government is a choice between often conflicting priorities. So if you want to see what a government’s priorities are, look at the choices they make.

The Division of Revenue cuts R2.2 billion from provincial governments’ infrastructure grants for building schools, roads and clinics.

But worse than that, the provinces are left to find R16 billion in “reprioritisations”. This means they must cut from other existing programmes to fund the health response. “Reprioritisation” is just another word for more cuts.

The message in this budget is that provincial governments are on their own in the fight against Covid-19.

Speaking to the nation [on Tuesday 21 April](#), the President promised “an extraordinary health budget...of R20 billion to fund the health response to the Coronavirus”. Where is this money? It certainly isn’t in this budget. The President did not say that provincial governments would have to find this money themselves.

The evidence suggests that the President misled the public when he made that commitment, for it has certainly not been honoured. There is no R20 billion.

The second development today is that the BBC has shown the country and the world what is really happening in the health systems in ANC governed provinces like the Eastern Cape. If one thought the ANC's record of human rights abuses could not possibly fall lower than the Life Esidimeni tragedy, today's revelations show that gross human rights abuses are taking place every day in the Eastern Cape, and on a much larger scale.

We have seen Covid-19 patients struggling to breathe having to physically fight one another to get an oxygen bottle. We've seen rats drinking blood, passages flooded with brown waste water, and we've heard doctors tell of mothers and their unborn babies dying waiting to be helped.

And we've seen absolutely no progress in nearly four months of lockdown in building properly equipped field hospitals in Gauteng and the Eastern Cape. The President's claim last week of 28 000 additional beds is another deception. In most cases the beds are not there, and when they are, they have no staff, no equipment, and no oxygen.

And that is why the final event today is so important: the prospect of another bailout to SAA. This cannot be allowed to happen. Now is the time for Minister Mboweni to draw a line in the sand and refuse to fund the "new" SAA. He has repeatedly said that South Africa cannot afford to fund a dead airline, and no matter how many times it is bailed out, it will always need more. If Mboweni caves to ANC pressure now, he will have lost the battle that is the prelude to all of the others to come, and he will have to seriously reconsider his position in government.

And we are putting the Minister on notice that any attempt to use "emergency" powers under Section 16 of the Public Finance Management Act will likely be illegal, and we will take action to stop that.

This is why I love budgets.

Ministers and Presidents can say what they like from the podium, but it is in the detail of the budget that priorities are really revealed.

And today the priorities of this government are revealed in the choice to hang provinces out to dry in the fight against Covid, to leave patients without air, unable to breathe, dying needlessly; and to fund a state airline vanity project instead.